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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE USE OF PROSE IN THE ENGLISH DRAMA: 1660-1800

To a superficial observer, sufficiently unfamiliar with the matter to take its form for granted, the most striking difference between the English drama of our times and that of the period of Shakspeare would be the relative preponderance of prose and verse. In the Elizabethan drama prose was exceptional; in the modern drama verse is exceptional. When and how did the change take place? Was it by accident, or of such an organic character as to be of historical significance? Does the relation of the two methods suggest anything as to the ideal form for dramatic expression? These are questions which seem never to have been definitely treated.

In the Elizabethan age, then, verse was the standard medium of dramatic expression, whether in comedy or tragedy, and any departure from the norm is usually to be explained as definite and intentional. The usual explanation of the change is a commonplace: when the dramatist wished to *lower the level* of action or expression, from romantic to humorous, from ideal to colloquial, or (less frequently) from emotional to merely intellectual, he introduced prose, and when he wished to lift the action or expression again to the normally idealized plane of the dramatic form, he returned to verse. Two examples from Shakspeare exemplify this as well as would a dozen: one of them from Act I, scene ii of *I Henry IV*, in which the Prince, after dallying with Falstaff and

his other fellows of doubtful respectability, suddenly returns, on the exit of Poins, to his real self and his princely speech—

I know you all, and will awhile uphold
The unyok'd humour of your idleness;

the other from Act III, scene ii, of *Julius Caesar*, where the purely reasonable speech of Brutus is in prose, the emotional appeal of Antony in verse. In many plays of the period (for example, Beaumont and Fletcher's *Knight of the Burning Pestle*) the same change repeatedly indicates the contrast between the levels of two different but interwoven plots.

When we pass to the next important period, that of the Restoration drama, we find that, despite the many changes in both content and style, the old rule of form still holds good on the whole. Dryden is here, as in all respects, the chief and most typical figure. In his *Marriage à la Mode* verse and prose indicate the two utterly different plots and motifs which go to make up that clever compound of Restorationism and romantic beauty; and in *The Spanish Friar*, a tragi-comedy, the two forms indicate in the same way the interwoven elements. But while the old rule remains, new conditions make the application of it give very different results, so that a glance at the whole body of Dryden's plays shows that the relative preponderance of prose and verse has already shifted conspicuously.

This shifting is clearly due to the new conception of comedy which was altering, in the age of Dryden, the fundamental lines of division between the various dramatic types. The romantic spirit was no longer equally characteristic of comedy and tragedy; on the contrary, while the latter was still thought of as a poetic idealization of life (so, also, the heroic play), comedy was becoming largely realistic, and was held to represent life—if one may say so—on a lower level. Dryden expresses this view, at least by implication, in his discussion of the use of rhyme on the stage in the *Essay of Heroic Plays*: "It is very clear to all who understand poetry, that serious plays ought not to imitate conversation too nearly" (Ker ed., i, 148). The heroic play is a representation of Nature "wrought up to an higher pitch" (*ibid.*, p. 100). With comedy—this is the obvious converse—it is otherwise.

It followed naturally, since comedy was thus becoming unideal, unromantic, and of a low colloquial level, that it should make a much larger use of prose and slighter use of verse. So, in Dryden's typically Restoration comedies, like *The Wild Gallant*, *An Evening's Love*, and their fellows, there is practically no verse; and it is only in the early play of *The Rival Ladies*, which is strongly romantic in tone (and is, in fact, a tragi-comedy), that verse predominates to the other extreme. Tragedies and heroic plays are of course not now under consideration, as it seems more convenient to proceed with the history of comedy by itself.

Dryden's best-known contemporaries used even less verse than he, because they had less need of it. Wycherley and Congreve wrote their comedies altogether in prose,¹ for there was no gleam of romance or idealism in them to require anything above the level of prose presentation. Of the minor playwrights Mrs. Aphra Behn is perhaps the most interesting for our purposes, since, more than any of her contemporaries, she was disposed to mingle romantic elements in her plays, and therefore was led to a conflict in the choice of forms. In *The Amorous Prince*, a genuinely romantic comedy, verse is the principal vehicle; in the purely low and realistic plays, like *Sir Patient Fancy* and *The Widow Ranter*, prose appears almost alone; while in *The Rover*, *The Town Fop*, and *The Younger Brother* both prose and verse are used, with a discrimination of their functions quite according to tradition. In a single play, *The Dutch Lover*, we find prose occasionally used where we should expect verse. Thus in Act II, scene iv, occurs a speech like this, in a scene where verse is also used:

Oh how he kills me! Well, at least this pleasure I have whilst I am dying, that when he possesses the fair Cleonte, he for ever ruins his interest in her heart, and must find nothing but her mortal hate and scorn.—*Plays, Histories, and Novels of Mrs. Behn* (1871), I, 236.

Of itself this instance is trivial enough, and might well be passed over, especially in a play which deserves oblivion even above others of its group; but the point becomes of interest because it would seem that what happened here is just what we shall see

¹ The only possible exception may be found in Wycherley's *Plain Dealer*, where blank verse seems to appear in three short soliloquies in I, i, and III, i. (See in *Mermaid* ed., pp. 392, 428, 431.) In the first instance the verse is of very doubtful character.

presently happened elsewhere—that when prose had become the familiar vehicle of comedy because of reasons inherent in the character of the comedy, it began also to usurp the place of verse in scenes whose tone did *not* demand it.

In the earlier eighteenth-century period Vanbrugh and Farquhar carried on the Restoration tradition. Their usual manner is well represented by Vanbrugh's *Relapse* (1697), which is entirely in prose with the exception of the opening scene, an ironically romantic passage. But Vanbrugh also uses prose in the romantic comedy of *The Mistake* (1705)—sometimes of a quasi-rhythmical character, as in Camillo's soliloquy (Act V, scene i):

How miserable a perplexity have I brought myself into! Yet why do I complain, since, with all the dreadful torture I endure, I can't repent of one wild step I've made? Oh, love! what tempests canst thou raise, what storms canst thou assuage! To all thy cruelties I am resigned; long years through seas of torment I'm content to roll, so thou wilt guide me to the happy port of my Lorenzo's arms, and bless me there with one calm day at last.—*British Theatre*, XXV, 69.

At the conclusion of the same play are speeches of which one wonders whether they should not be printed as blank verse. A similar use of this heightened, romantic prose, in this instance breaking into actual verse, is found at the close of Farquhar's *Inconstant* (1702) (Ewald ed. of Farquhar, I, 419–21).

Further progress in the same direction is marked by the work of Colley Cibber, who may be regarded as the common denominator, for the drama, of the ages of Congreve, Addison, and Johnson. Cibber always preferred prose for comedy, no matter how serious his intent, yet at times evidently felt the need of verse to lift his material to the proper level. Of this the best example is *The Refusal* (1721), all in prose save the love scene between Granger and Sophronia (V, i), where verse seems to have been felt to be indispensable to the depicting of passion. In the earlier play, *Love Makes a Man* (1701), may be found more of the rhythmical prose or bastard verse of which we have already seen a specimen in Vanbrugh. See, for example, such a speech as that of Carlos (V, ii):

Do not debase your generous revenge with cruelty; that every common wretch can take: the savage brutes can suck their fellow-creature's blood, and tear their bodies down; but greater human souls have more pride to curb, and bow the stubborn mind of what they hate; and such revenge, the nobler far, I offer now to you; see at your feet my humbled scorn imploring, crushed, and prostrate, like a vile slave, that falls below your last contempt, and trembling begs for mercy.—*British Theatre*, VII, 102.

There is much more like this, but extended quotation will readily be excused. Most of Cibber's other comedies are wholly in prose, except for the general use of couplet tags and the like; and since in many of them no little romantic feeling is involved, the dominions of prose are seen to have tended steadily to widen.

At the same time with Cibber, Richard Steele was promoting this tendency in his "sentimental" comedies.¹ The conditions in the two cases are almost the same. Thus *The Funeral* (1701) is for the most part written in purely realistic prose, but in the coffin scene (V, iv) we pass through prose of a heightened character (such as "How shall I view, a breathless lump of clay, him whose high veins conveyed to me this vital force and motion?") to genuine blank verse. The same vehicle is used for the didactic, Polonius-like speech of Lord Brumpton, a little later in the same scene, and, it might be added, in the brief lyrical passage on the death of a squirrel, in scene iii. *The Lying Lover* (1703) shows a similar commingling of romantic prose and casual blank verse in the last scene (new Mermaid ed. of Steele's plays, pp. 178-84), while in other scenes occurs the same doubtful rhythmical prose that we have met in Cibber. For example:

She smiled; the ladies clapped their hands, and all our music struck sympathetic rapture at my happiness; while gentle winds, the river, air, and shore echoed the harmony in notes more soft than they received it. Methought all nature seemed to die for love like me. To all my heart and every pulse beat time.—*Ibid.*, p. 118. See also 130 f. and 170 f.

¹ He is usually spoken of as the founder of the form, and perhaps rightly enough. But *Love Makes a Man* exhibits some of the same peculiarities, especially this quasi-romantic prose. Its precise date does not seem to be known, but Steele's *Funeral* was produced late in 1701, and is therefore probably the later of the two plays. Since Cibber's comedies were very numerous, and were fairly popular through a long period, he may fairly be regarded as the leading factor in the new type of comic prose.

In *The Tender Husband* (1705), which is satiric in tone, prose is used throughout; and the same thing is true of *The Conscious Lovers* (1722), though this play is again of the sentimental type. For the most part even the romantic elements here are presented in a realistic and fairly pedestrian prose, occasionally rising into passages for which dramatists of the older school would have demanded verse.

From this time on verse becomes almost an entire stranger to comedy. Foote, Whitehead, Colman, Garrick, Kelly, and Cumberland, who, with Goldsmith, represent the original comedy of the period from 1750 to 1780, wrote wholly in prose.¹ In general this triumph of prose marks the triumph of the *familiar* comedy; but, as we have seen, the form held good even where the romantic note was also present. Goldsmith illustrates both statements. *The Goodnatured Man* and *She Stoops to Conquer* are both worked out on the familiar level and in colloquial prose; in the latter, when we reach a fairly romantic scene, we still find the kind of prose—intended to be at once realistic and romantic—which the comedy of the century had been developing:

Miss Hardcastle. Do you think I would take the mean advantage of a transient passion, to load you with confusion? Do you think I could ever relish that happiness which was acquired by lessening yours?

Marlowe. By all that's good, I can have no happiness but what's in your power to grant me! Nor shall I ever feel repentance but in not having seen your merits before. I will stay even contrary to your wishes; and although you should persist to shun me, I will make my respectful assiduities atone for the levity of my past conduct.—Globe ed. of Goldsmith, p. 675.

The lovers of Sheridan rise to higher reaches than this, though still on the ground of prose. When Julia cries:

Then on the bosom of your wedded Julia, you may lull your keen regret to slumbering; while virtuous love, with a cherub's hand, shall smooth the brow of upbraiding thought, and pluck the thorn from compunction.—*The Rivals*, V, i.

or, in her concluding outburst, tells us that

¹That is, of course, in comedy. Whitehead and Cumberland used verse for their serious plays.

when hearts deserving happiness would unite their fortunes, Virtue would crown them with an unfading garland of modest hurtless flowers,¹ we feel more than ever that prose is laboring under a weight too heavy for it, and, while trying at once to achieve realism and romance, is in great danger of losing both.

Let us now retrace our steps to see whether any similar movement was going on in tragedy. In the Restoration period, as has been noted, tragedy was still treated as an elevated and poetic form; and even Congreve, the most skilled of the writers of comic prose in that age, wrote his one tragedy, *The Mourning Bride*, entirely in verse. Dryden, too, used no tragic prose, save in the one extraordinary and repulsive play of *Amboyna*, in which a contemporary incident was realistically dramatized. In this tragedy occurs a colloquial prose, varied at times by bastard verse (printed as prose), which anticipates the worst efforts of the sort in the eighteenth century drama. (For instances, see the Scott-Saintsbury ed. of Dryden, V, 22, 41, 51.) The performance must be regarded, however, as a mere aberration, without significance for the tendencies of the time. Crowne and Southerne, while using prose freely for interspersed scenes in the comic or colloquial manner (see for examples the *Regulus* of Crowne and the *Oroonoko* of Southerne), wrote the serious scenes of their tragedies wholly in verse. The same is true of Otway and (passing into the next century) of Rowe. Even Cibber used verse for all his tragedies and for the pastoral play called *Love in a Riddle*. Ambrose Philips' *Distressed Mother* (1712) and Addison's *Cato* (1713), the favorite tragedies of the second decade of the century, were wholly in verse, as were those of Young and Thomson a little later.

But the rise of the "domestic" drama was destined to affect the form of tragedy also. It seems to be George Lillo to whom belongs the doubtful honor of first writing an English tragedy in prose—*George Barnwell* (1731), for a long time a famous play. That the choice of the form was deliberate we cannot doubt, since

¹ It has occasionally been suggested that these romantic passages in Sheridan's comedies are not to be taken seriously—that he was laughing in his sleeve as he wrote them. Perhaps he was; but I see no evidence that he intended the reader to laugh as he read them; and certain other appearances of Sheridan's romantic prose (see below) tend to oppose such a view.

it harmonizes so clearly with the choice of theme and style. In the Dedication (addressed to an Alderman of the City, as if Lillo were resolved to be consistently *bourgeois* in every part) the dramatist said:

I have attempted, indeed, to enlarge the province of the graver kind of poetry, and should be glad to see it carried on by some abler hand. Plays founded on moral tales in private life may be of admirable use; etc.

It appears, then, that he regarded the play as included in the field of "poetry" in the large sense of the word. The form shows the same wavering between the feeling of a need for rhythm and the desire to represent actual human speech, which we saw in the contemporary comedies of Cibber and Steele. Sometimes prose is sufficient, as here:

As doubts and fears, followed by reconciliation, ever increase love where the passion is sincere, so in him it caused so wild a transport of excessive fondness, such joy, such grief, such pleasure, and such anguish, that nature seemed sinking with the weight, and his charmed soul disposed to quit his breast for hers.—III, ii; *British Theatre*, XIV, 51.

At other times rhythm becomes clearer:

Truman. Shall fortune sever those whom friendship joined? Thy miseries cannot lay thee so low, but love will find thee. Here will we offer to stern calamity; this place the altar, and ourselves the sacrifice. Our mutual groans shall echo to each other through the dreary vault; our sighs shall number the moments as they pass, and mingling tears communicate such anguish, as words were never made to express.

Barnwell. Then be it so. Since you propose an intercourse of woe, pour all your griefs into my breast and in exchange take mine. Where's now the anguish that you promised? You've taken mine, and make me no return. Sure peace and comfort dwell within these arms, and sorrow can't approach me while I am here.—V, ii; *ibid.*, 81.

There are also in this closing act lines which for short periods might well be printed as verse.

In Lillo's later tragedy, *The Fatal Curiosity* (1736), although the theme is again domestic, the medium of expression is blank verse. His *Arden of Feversham* and *Marina* are also chiefly in verse, and the remaining tragedies or tragi-comedies, *The Christian Hero* and *Elmerick*, wholly in verse. But his chief successor in the domestic drama, Edward Moore, followed the example set

by *George Barnwell*, and in *The Gamester* (1753) produced the most completely realistic tragedy which had yet been written. Here prose is used throughout, and prose which only occasionally shows a disposition to break into rhythm. Even where it reaches the highest emotional intensity, it is kept genuinely colloquial with a skill not shown in any of the work we have seen hitherto. See, for example, the soliloquy of the hero at the time of his suicide:

How the self-murderer's account may stand, I know not. But this I know—the load of hateful life oppresses me too much—the horrors of my soul are more than I can bear. Father of mercy!—I cannot pray. Despair has laid his iron hand upon me, and sealed me for perdition. Conscience! conscience! thy clamours are too loud—here's that shall silence thee. Thou art most friendly to the miserable. Come, then, thou cordial for sick minds—come to my heart.—V, iv; *British Theatre*, X, 86.

A priori one would have expected a considerable further development in this direction following the lines already indicated by comedy. But this did not prove to be the case. The old dignity of tragedy could not be overthrown; moreover, if people wanted familiar life treated seriously, they now had the new form of the realistic novel to satisfy them. So the later eighteenth-century writers of tragedy, like Whitehead, Home, and Cumberland, not to speak of Dr. Johnson and his *Irene*, all turned to the earlier type for both style and verse-form. The only noteworthy exceptions are found in two or three romantic plays—tragi-comedies rather than pure tragedies—written under German influence, and dating from the very end of the century. Thus in the dramatized version of Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, written by George Colman the younger and called *The Iron Chest* (1796), prose is used indiscriminately for serious passages, at the same time with verse. In *The Castle Spectre* (1797), by M. G. Lewis, author of *The Monk*, prose is used throughout. The style of the more romantic scenes of the latter play may be exemplified by this passage from Act IV, scene ii:

Angela. Sure an age must have elapsed since the Friar left me, and still the bell strikes not One! Percy, does thy impatience equal mine? Dost thou too count the moments which divide us? Dost thou too chide the slowness of Time's pinions, which moved so swiftly when we strayed

together on the Cheviot Hills? Methinks I see him now, as he paces the Conway's margin; if a leaf falls, if a bird flutters, he flies toward it, for he thinks 'tis the footstep of Angela; then, with slow steps and bending head, disappointed he regains the fisher's cottage. . . . Oh! sigh no more, my Percy. Soon shall I repose in safety on your bosom; soon again see the moon shed her silver light on Cheviot, and hear its green hills repeat the carol of your mellow horn!

Finally we may note Sheridan's adaptation of Kotzebue's *Spaniards in Peru*, produced under the title *Pizarro* in 1799—a romantic tragedy. Of the style of this play one of Sheridan's editors observes:

Long practice in the ornate rhetoric of the House of Commons had told severely on Sheridan's style. Indeed, some of the dialogue in the play is actually culled from his parliamentary utterances. Pitt said that he had heard the tragedy already—in the Begum speech.—R. Dircks, in *Camelot* ed. of Sheridan's plays, Introduction, p. xxviii.

A typical passage from *Pizarro*, illustrative of this tendency to the oratorical style, is this from the conclusion of the third act:

Yes, thou undaunted!—thou whom yet no mortal hazard has appalled—thou who on Panama's brow didst make alliance with the raging elements that tore the silence of that horrid night, when thou didst follow, as thy pioneer, the crashing thunder's drift; and, stalking o'er the trembling earth, didst plant thy banner by the red volcano's mouth! thou who, when battling on the sea, and thy brave ship was blown to splinters, wast seen, as thou didst bestride a fragment of the smoking wreck, to wave thy glittering sword above thy head, as thou wouldst defy the world in that extremity!—come, fearless man! now meet the last and fellest peril of thy life; meet and survive an injured woman's fury.—*Camelot* ed., p. 304. (Compare similar passages on pp. 285, 305.)

This is clearly a hybrid style, which lacks the rhythm needed to support its emotional intensity, lacks the rational element necessary for legitimate oratorical prose, and lacks the element of realism necessary for the dramatic representation of human speech. In connection with this incidental appearance of the question of the oratorical style as related to prose and poetry, it may be worth while to recall an interesting remark of Hazlitt's, in a passage descriptive of the style of Burke; "the most perfect prose style," he calls it, "the most dazzling, that which went the nearest to the verge of poetry, and yet never fell over." Then this:

It differs from poetry, as I conceive, like the chamois from the eagle: it climbs to an almost equal height, touches upon a cloud, overlooks a precipice, . . . but all the while, instead of soaring through the air, it stands upon a rocky cliff, clambers up by abrupt and intricate ways.—“The Prose Style of Poets,” in *The Plain Speaker*, Waller-Glover ed. of Hazlitt, VII, 10.

Like the mountain chamois, then, prose may reach heights which cannot be distinguished from those attained by poetry, but in doing so it must keep its feet on the ground, and proceed by pedestrian processes. Carrying on the figure (which is genuinely illustrative, not merely fanciful), one might say that rhythm represents the wings of poetry—the sign of its imaginative process; they permit and justify its directer and less earthy mode of motion.

The historical survey of our subject cannot at present be continued into the nineteenth century. Owing to the persistent separation, during that period in England, of the literary and the acted drama, such a study would necessarily mean something different from what it does for the earlier centuries. So far as the literary drama is concerned, it has of course been largely tragedy, following the traditional form of verse. On the other hand, the acted drama has been largely comedy, and, whether primarily realistic or romantic, it has generally taken the form determined for it in the eighteenth century—prose. In the case of the few dramatists who have written plays both to be acted and to be read, like Bulwer-Lytton, for example, the old distinction has usually been followed—verse for serious or romantic scenes, prose for colloquial or comic.¹ But there has been on the one hand so little genuinely romantic comedy, and on the other so little genuine tragedy outside the closet drama, that the materials for any inductive generalization are largely wanting.

It remains, then, only to summarize the results of our survey of the conditions of the eighteenth-century drama, and to suggest some theoretical considerations which the historical materials have served to illustrate. The gist of the whole matter has been this: verse was gradually abandoned for comedy, first because the

¹As exceptions to the prevalent fashion one may recall such comedies as Boker's *Betrothal*, Gilbert's *Wicked World* and *Pygmalion and Galatea*, and (very recently) Mr. Mackaye's *Canterbury Pilgrims*—all written in verse, even in the more familiar scenes.

romantic spirit died out from comedy in the interest of a purely descriptive or satiric presentation of human life, and prose afterward held the field even when the romantic element occasionally returned. A similar effort was made to win tragedy for prose, in the interest of the realistic treatment of human suffering, but failed.

As the case is somewhat clearer for tragedy, it will be well to consider this first on the theoretical side. Prose has never proved a fit vehicle for English tragedy; not only has it failed to establish itself, but there is not a single example of a lastingly important prose tragedy in the language. If we seek for the fundamental reason, it may be stated under three aspects: for tragic art, prose is too homely, too crude, and too individual.

The term "homely" has reference simply to the matter of dialogue style. Tragedy, by nature and tradition, is a form of the greatest dignity, dealing with profound problems of emotional and imaginative significance. Prose style, within its normal limits, is inadequate to represent these. We have seen what has happened when it has tried to do so: either it has encroached on the region of verse, and adopted a bastard or hybrid form, or it has encroached on the region of poetical style, laboring under imaginative language which it is ill suited to carry, with a resulting pseudo-oratorical or melodramatic effect. But, it may be asked, since tragedy deals after all with the real emotions of human experience, and since in the case of individual experiences we normally express these emotions in prose, why may not the dramatist imitate this familiar human language?

The second and third points are the answer to this question. If the dramatist tries to represent tragic conditions, whether in dialogue or otherwise, precisely as they are found in real life, he presents too crudely the raw materials of tragedy, and the result is likely to be painful instead of exalting. On this point it will suffice to call two important witnesses, Wordsworth and Goethe. In the Preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, seeking for various justifications for the metrical form of poetry despite his general doctrine that poetry does not *per se* require a different medium of expression from prose, Wordsworth says:

From the tendency of meter to divest language, in a certain degree, of its reality, and thus to throw a sort of half-consciousness of unsubstantial existence over the whole composition, there can be little doubt but that more pathetic situations and sentiments—that is, those which have a greater proportion of pain connected with them—may be endured in metrical composition. . . . This opinion may be further illustrated by appealing to the reader's own experience of the reluctance with which he comes to the reperusal of the distressful parts of *Clarissa Harlowe*, or *The Gamester*; while Shakspeare's writings, in the most pathetic scenes, never act upon us as pathetic beyond the bounds of pleasure—an effect which, in a much greater degree than might at first be imagined, is to be ascribed to small, but continual and regular impulses of pleasurable surprise from the metrical arrangement.—Globe ed. of Wordsworth, p. 858.

Of Wordsworth's psychological theory here there may be some question, but the important point is the testimony as to the æsthetic effect of verse in connection with tragic material. Now compare Goethe, who was discussing the same subject with Schiller in 1797 and 1798. (This was nearly twenty years earlier than Wordsworth's second Preface, written in 1815, but there is no probability that Wordsworth knew anything directly of the Letters.) On May 5, 1798, we find Goethe writing, à propos of the progress of his work on *Faust*:

Ein sehr sonderbarer Fall erscheint dabei: einige tragische Scenen¹ waren in Prosa geschrieben, sie sind durch ihre Natürlichkeit und Stärke, in Verhältniss gegen das andere, ganz unerträglich. Ich suche sie deswegen gegenwärtig in Reime zu bringen, da denn die Idee, wie durch einen Flor durchscheint, die unmittelbare Wirkung des ungeheuern Stoffes aber gedämpft wird.—Letter 457, *Briefwechsel zwischen Schiller und Goethe*, ed. of 1881, II, 66. (My attention was originally directed to this letter by a note in Professor Gummere's *The Beginnings of Poetry*, p. 73.)

To which Schiller responded, on May 8:

Ihre neuliche Bemerkung, dass die Ausführung einiger tragischen Scenen in Prosa so gewaltsam angreifend ausgefallen, bestätigt eine ältere Erfahrung die Sie bei der Mariane im Meister gemacht haben, wo gleichfalls der pure Realism in einer pathetischen Situation so heftig wirkt, und einen nicht poetischen Ernst hervorbringt.—Letter 458, *ibid.*, p. 67.

¹ The scenes in question would seem to be that in *Auerbachs Keller* (5) and the great last scene, *Kerker* (24). See the *Urfaust*, edited by Schmidt, 1905, pp. 19-31, 83-89.

Surely the truth of these observations is borne out by our own impressions of tragedy as expressed by the masters, notably Shakspeare. The crude data of human suffering and failure, intolerable in themselves, are not merely interpreted and imaginatively beautified, but they are softened, lifted into a diviner air, and universalized by the very fact of rhythmical presentation. On the other hand, as will be considered more particularly a little later, on certain occasions when the rhythm seems to break with the eccentric horror of the emotion, returning to the crude stuff of prose utterance, the impression received is one of pain unrelieved by the usual sense of reconciliation and tragic beauty.

From this point it is hardly a step to the third; indeed the word "universalized" has already been used of the function of rhythm. Prose presents experience in a form too purely individual for tragedy; verse gives the impression of universal law underlying the words of the speaker, and he becomes not merely an idiosyncratic sufferer, but a spokesman for the sorrows of the world. When Lillo chose a Newgate criminal, with no claims to a typical position or to universal sympathy, as the hero of his bourgeois tragedy, he was painfully consistent in choosing prose as the medium of expression. The reader is effectively stirred to pity and terror, but there is no reason why he should be. In this connection we may well look again at the Schiller-Goethe correspondence. In 1797 (November 24), after giving an account of the remarkable way in which a change from prose to verse form lifted the whole tone of his work from the commonplace into the region of imaginative dignity, Schiller added:

Der Rhythmus leistet bei einer dramatischen Production noch dieses grosse und bedeutende, dass er, indem er alle Charaktere und alle Situationen nach Einem Gesetz behandelt, und sie, trotz ihres innern Unterschiedes, in Einer Form ausführt, er dadurch den Dichter und seinen Leser nöthiget, von allem noch so charakteristisch-verschiedenem etwas allgemeines, rein menschliches zu verlangen. Alles soll sich in dem Geschlechtsbegriff des Poetischen vereinigen, und diesem Gesetz dient der Rhythmus sowohl zum Repräsentanten als zum Werkzeug, da er alles inter Seinem Gesetze begreift. Er bildet auf diese Weise die Atmosphäre für die poetische Schöpfung, das gröbere bleibt zurück, nur das geistige

kann von diesem dünnen Elemente getragen werden.—Letter 374, *op. cit.*, I, 329.¹

From all which it appears that that transforming power which in tragedy lays hold of the sufferings or failure of a petty individual spirit, and makes them of significance to the whole race, works normally through the elevating, softening, and universalizing medium of rhythm.

These general conclusions regarding the place of verse in tragedy are not of a character to meet with much opposition. When we pass to comedy, however, the conditions are not quite so clear. The use of prose in comedy has been so long and so firmly established that to question it requires more boldness. But in all that is here said, it will be remembered, reference is had only to *romantic comedy*, not that which portrays life from a descriptive, critical, or satiric standpoint. Our historical study has indicated that it was rather by accident that prose was carried over from the latter type into the former, and that the results were at least questionable.

Briefly, of the three points urged against prose as a medium for tragic expression, the first and third (excluding the argument based on the painfulness of the crude data of tragedy) may be said to hold good for romantic comedy. For in this region also prose is too homely and too individual for the highest purposes of the dramatist.

The inadequacy of prose for the right presentation of the dialogue of romantic comedy should have been made clear by the quotations given in the preceding pages. It is true that they were taken, for the most part, from the work of dramatists of the second rank or under, and that they were written in a period

¹Goethe replied, giving strong approval to Schiller's observations, and adding: "Alle dramatische Arbeiten sollten rhythmisch sein." It is also interesting to read his condemnation of such hybrid rhythmical prose as we have found in the transition period of the English drama. "Dass man nach und nach poetische Prosa einführen konnte, zeigt nur dass man den Unterschied zwischen Prosa und Poesie gänzlich aus den Augen verlor. Es ist nicht besser als wenn sich jemand in seinem Park einen trockenen See bestellte und der Gartenkünstler diese Aufgabe dadurch aufzulösen suchte dass er einen Sumpf anlegte. Diese Mittelgeschlechter sind nur für Liebhaber und Pfücher, so wie die Sumpfe für Amphibien."—Letter 375, *ibid.*, p. 330. Lessing made use of an equally interesting figure, when he spoke of some prose translations "in welchen der Gebrauch der kühnsten Tropen und Figuren, ausser einer gebundenen cadenzirten Wortfügung, uns an Besessene denken lässt, die ohne Musik tanzen."—*Dramaturgie*, No. 19.

dominated by certain qualities of style which now seem artificial or affected. Later dramatists have done better, no doubt, and would have done still better if the tradition of a really literary comedy had been maintained. Nevertheless the fundamental difficulty with the style of the passages under consideration is inherent in their position. A prose writer, to depict a romantic or imaginative moment in a drama, must do one of two things: he must either attempt to lift it from mere realism to the level which its character seems to call for, or he must try to present it precisely as it might occur in actual experience. The former method, used by most of the eighteenth-century writers whom we have been considering, results in that bad "poetical prose" which attempts to do something for which prose is not fitted. The latter method, which becomes increasingly common as we pass to the later periods, and includes the best work in nineteenth-century comedy, fails as a rule to strike the genuinely romantic note. It raises a smile (as Mr. Archer has lately complained in the case of all the plays of Mr. Bernard Shaw) instead of the eager sigh of the impassioned hearer or reader. Or, if it succeeds in awakening our romantic instincts for the moment, it does so illegitimately, as it were, without the lasting justification of universalized romantic beauty; in other words, it falls under the other objection, that prose is too *individual* a mode of utterance.

It would be difficult and perhaps tedious to support this position by examples. Instead, let appeal be made to the memory of those who have listened repeatedly, in the case of prose comedies, to scenes in which the passion of romantic love is represented. In most cases it will be found that there is present an element of critical or satiric, if not humorous, enjoyment of the scene, instead of the attitude appropriate to true romance. And when it is otherwise, has the auditor not sometimes felt a certain shamefaced sense, at the height of the scene of passion, as of being an intruder—of eavesdropping where he is not concerned, of seeing what is personal and not for the general eye? Why is there no suggestion of such a feeling in the presence of the loves of Romeo and Juliet, or of Ferdinand and Miranda? Because these are lifted above individualism and realism, to the region of universal love and

beauty. And the rhythmical quality of poetry, as we have seen, is largely instrumental in this.

The fact is, we have gone over so largely to comedy of the non-romantic sort that we have lost the charm and forgotten the laws of the other type. The hand of the Restoration is still upon us, separating comedy and poetry, reality and romance. This has never happened to the same degree in the drama of Germany or France, and there are occasional signs that it will not always be so with us.

In conclusion, there remain a few remarks which may be regarded as answers to two possible objections to the foregoing argument. First of all, what of the relation of this doctrine to the novel? If prose is an illegitimate or inadequate form for the presentation of romantic and tragic themes, how has it been so successfully used in tragic novel and prose romance?

To try to answer this fully would take us a long way. But it may be suggested, in the first place, that the novel is to be regarded as a less fixed or perfect form than the drama, and hence as less imperiously demanding the exact adaptation of means to ends. Without going to the length of certain eighteenth-century critics, who held the new form of fiction to be illegitimate because it could not be fitted into any of the traditional literary categories, one may still perceive that, compared with the drama, the novel is a somewhat inaccurate or lawless genre. We should not expect of it, then, the completeness or ideality which the poetic form implies. In the second place, the novel has never so completely justified itself in the regions of romance and tragedy as in those of descriptive and satiric comedy. The chief of its early masters, Fielding, was right in defining it, at its best, as "prose comic epic" in character, and in giving it a prevailingly satiric tone. Of all the novels of the first rank, but few are of the tragic order; and while the great prose romances may be thought to be more numerous (here the critics would quarrel), here also there is a half-hidden feeling that whatever they can do, poetry after all can do better. In the descriptive or satiric novel, on the other hand, there is a freedom, a fidelity to mere fact, an absolution from the necessity of reconciling life with the eternal verities, to which

prose can minister even better than verse. In the third place, the novel does not present human life, and especially human speech, with the same immediate directness as the drama; all is reported through the medium of the writer. Hence there is provided something equivalent to that veil, that softening or distancing element, which we have seen to be needed in the reproduction of the intensest emotional experiences, especially when they are painful; and the verse-form is not so much missed. Fourthly and finally, the novelist presents the most tragic and the most romantic moments of his story not by any means solely through direct dialogue and direct action, as in the drama, but very largely through suggestion. Hence the problem of uplifting and ennobling human speech, ever-present in dramatic dialogue, is here much slighter. Perhaps the two most poignant tragic scenes in the modern English novel are the concluding ones of Meredith's *Richard Feverel* and Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. In both cases the catastrophe is removed from the actual stage of action; in the one case described, in the other only suggested. Direct human utterance is used as far as it can safely go in realistic form; but when the emotional intensity is highest, it is abandoned for the indirect presentation to the imagination of what lies behind the veil. This hasty outline of certain differences between the possibilities of novel and drama will perhaps help to explain why we are content with prose in the one form when we feel its limitations in the other.

The other possible objection to the views set forth in the foregoing pages is found in an appeal to certain masters of the dramatic form, notably Shakspeare; is it not true—to put it most directly—that, while Shakspeare wrote no tragedy or romantic comedy wholly in prose, he used prose very freely in the more serious plays, and that the proportionate amount of this prose increases as we enter the period of his greatest work? To this one must undoubtedly answer yes. Here again we touch on a matter far too large to be treated adequately at present. The use of prose in the tragedies of Shakspeare is one of the most interesting problems which a student of his workmanship can touch, and whoever should solve the problem, for the play of *Hamlet* alone, would perhaps have reached something like a final state-

ment of the capacities of prose and verse for creative art. All that can now be done is to suggest, as in the question raised by the other objection, why the phenomena under consideration do not militate against the view of verse-form already presented. In the first place, then, the comic and colloquial uses of prose go a good deal farther than what the most familiar use of the terms implies. Hamlet's reflections on the skull in the graveyard scene are by no means comic, but in their brutal presentation of repulsive fact they are as much in contrast with an idealized or poetic treatment of death as the conversation of the grave-diggers themselves. This may give a hint as to why prose is their fitting form. In the same connection Mr. Churton Collins has said that in *Hamlet* prose "becomes the language in which the Prince communes not with himself but with the world" ("Shakespeare as a Prose Writer," *Studies in Shakespeare*, p. 204)—a remark which again may suggest a widened use of the term "colloquial prose."

But passing beyond what can possibly be called colloquial or comic, we find in the plays of Shakspeare's supreme period a considerable amount of prose more difficult to analyze. The cause of it appears to be a matter of intellect, not of emotional expression, and it becomes conspicuous, as by rights it should, in the period when the poet's work was characterized by what one critic has called "the discordant weight of thought" (Mr. D. Laurance Chambers, in *The Metre of Macbeth*). This prose forms no real exception to the general law as to the demand for rhythm wherever the main movement is that of the emotions and the imagination. It may be said to be a kind of precipitate of the predominately intellectual view of life, and disappears again, in large measure, in the later plays where life is once more really solvent in the poetic imagination.

Last of all, there are certain passages in which prose is used under conditions of the profoundest emotional intensity. These are very few, but very significant; allusion has already been made to them. In this case we have gone all the way round the circle, past the point where rhythm veils, idealizes, and reconciles pain, to the point where the pain will not be veiled or reconciled, but will appear in the chaotic intensity of anarchic prose. Such a

moment is that of Lear's impending madness, where it mingles in terrible discord with the assumed madness of Edgar and the quasi-madness of the fool. Or, again, that when Othello breaks into raving before he falls in a cataleptic trance, and that when—a little later—he cries in an abandonment even of the manliness of his grief:

Ay, let her rot, and perish, and be damn'd to-night; for she shall not live. No, my heart is turn'd to stone; I strike it, and it hurts my hand. Passages like these are felt to be intensely painful, in the sense in which Wordsworth said that Shakspeare's tragedies are not, on the whole, painful "beyond the bounds of pleasure;"¹ and we pass over them hurriedly, eager for the recovery of the poetic equilibrium, under which the passion is mastered by the reconciling and restraining power of verse—as, for example, here:

Had it pleas'd Heaven
To try me with affliction; had they rain'd
All kind of sores and shames on my bare head,
Steep'd me in poverty to the very lips,
Given to captivity me and my utmost hopes,
I should have found in some place of my soul
A drop of patience.

This is the language of suffering, but of suffering made more than tolerable—made beautiful. And always we shall find that the conclusion of the tragedy becomes rhythmical, the verse once more growing sweet and regular, as the climax of intensity disappears and the sorrow of the defeated actors fades into a steadily pulsing rhythm that seems to symbolize the underlying imperturbable order of the universe.

RAYMOND MACDONALD ALDEN

LELAND STANFORD JR. UNIVERSITY

APPENDIX

One should not forget an interesting effort made in France to establish the legitimacy of prose for tragedy, by a contemporary of Lillo's, Houdar de la Motte. This charming prose writer and interesting rationalist, though he produced several popular dramas

¹ Compare the *Trüber Tag* scene of *Faust* (22), where Goethe retained the prose form though abandoning it elsewhere.

in verse, professed to do so merely out of deference to public taste, and pleased himself by publishing a prose version of his tragedy of *Œdipe*, side by side with the acted metrical version. He defended the prose form on the fundamental ground of *vrai-semblance*. How absurd that a hero, instead of speaking straight out as he would do in real life, should subject all his utterances to the demands of an arbitrary number of syllables and the regular return of the same sounds! "Les passions seront toujours d'autant mieux imitées qu'on leur feroit parler leur vraie langue: or les passions originales n'ont jamais parlé en vers." La Motte added to his theoretical observations, and to his own prose tragedy, a translation of the first scene of Racine's *Mithridate*, in order to exemplify the fact that nothing really valuable is lost by such a proceeding. If any readers do feel a sense of loss, he maintains, the fact will show that they have been in the habit of giving more attention to the verse form than to the more important elements of the tragedy. La Motte, it will be observed, strikes at the very roots of all theoretical justification of the verse drama. The essence of poetry, for him, is "les expressions audacieuses, les figures hyperboliques, tout ce langage reculé de l'usage ordinaire;" and these things, while well enough suited to lyrical writing, are less appropriate to the drama than to oratory; they tempt the poet to a lyricism which usurps the natural utterance of his characters.

To these arguments Voltaire replied in the Preface to his *Œdipe*, but not—it must be admitted—very effectively. It is rhyme rather than verse itself in which he is chiefly interested; and he accepts La Motte's view that the only important charm of metrical form consists in the admiration it arouses for difficulties overcome. The latter replied, in an admirably urbane "Suite des réflexions sur la tragédie," taking the sufficiently liberal ground: "Les tragédies en prose plairoient ou ne plairoient pas. Si elles ne plaiseoient pas, . . . qu'aurions-nous perdu? Nous n'en saurions que mieux à quoi nous en tenir; et les vers demeureroient tranquilles dans leur possession. Si elles plaisoient au contraire, n'aurions-nous pas multiplié nos plaisirs?" There follows a pleasant fable of a nation which originally sang all its verse, until an innovator abolished the music in a drama, leaving only

the poetry and the action. Little by little the new method gave pleasure, at length driving out the old. The innovator next proposed to omit the element of verse: "Pourquoi ce reste de musique dans la représentation des choses ordinaires? Puisque vous faites agir des hommes, faites les parler comme des hommes. Vous vous êtes rapprochés de la nature; encore un pas, et vous l'atteindrez." (These various citations are from the *Œuvres de M. Houdar de la Motte*, 1754, I, 555; IV, 391-94, 413, 440-43. See also some remarks of Lanson in his *Histoire de la littérature française*, p. 632.)

Somewhat later Diderot made a similar proposal, in connection with his interest in "domestic tragedy." Thus, in the second of the *Entretiens sur le Fils Naturel*, he refers approvingly to *The London Merchant* and *The Gamester*, and adds: "Les tragédies de Shakspeare sont moitié vers et moitié prose. Le premier poète qui nous fit rire avec de la prose, introduisit la prose dans la comédie. Le premier poète qui nous fera pleurer avec de la prose, introduira la prose dans la tragédie." (*Œuvres de Diderot*, 1821 ed., IV, 163. See also some remarks in the tenth section of the essay *De la Poésie Dramatique*, *ibid.*, p. 477.)

Needless to say, these critics did not prove convincing, even to an age when poetic feeling was quite as much thinned out in France as in England. Dramatic verses remained "tranquilles dans leur possession." But it may be observed that the theory which they set forth might at any time have, a priori, a better chance of finding adherents among their countrymen than in English-speaking lands, since the French language has never differentiated the styles of prose and verse with the same thoroughness as English.